

Iowa Quality Standards

Recommendations for Next Steps in Use and System Building

June 2015

Submitted on behalf of the State Planning Advisory Committee

by State Public Policy Group, Inc. (SPPG)

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Iowa Quality Standards – June 2015

In the fall of 2014, the Iowa Council on Homelessness (ICH) asked the State Planning Advisory Committee to continue their work to further develop and move toward implementing the standards called for in its 2013 request. All members of the Committee agreed to continue serving with the facilitation and support of State Public Policy Group (SPPG). In day-long monthly meetings, the Committee achieved its goals of reviewing and finalizing the standards and developing a self-appraisal and implementation tool available to any organization wishing to use it.

Since work began again last fall, it has focused on confirmation and minor adjustments of the standards while developing the supportive materials. The Committee worked from its original definition of a standard:

A “standard” is an element of a homelessness program’s operations, services, or performance that is necessary for a quality program and meets funder requirements.

These are fundamental standards necessary for a quality program. Some organizations may exceed many of the standards, and that is to be commended. The same organizations may see that they fall short in some standards, which allows the organization to focus on areas in which improvements can be made.

In the course of its review, the Committee sought input statewide and incorporated suggestions that added value and critical elements to the standards. For example, some of the language seemed to apply only to those organizations receiving public funds, so the language was adjusted to more clearly reflect the intent that standards do apply to all types of organizations and programs, regardless of funding sources. The January 2015 retreat conducted with the Iowa Council on Homelessness provided valuable guidance on tone and content that helped shape the final products.

Several elements were carried throughout the work of the Committee during this second year.

- More deliberate focus was given to the impact of the standards and their implementation on the creation of a statewide system of homelessness services.
- The final standards and tools to help organizations work toward meeting standards require a comprehensive handbook that allows an organization to conduct its self-appraisal and to identify resources to help address areas of focus.
- Interest in the standards and implementation tool for start-up organizations was voiced by stakeholders with increased frequency, leading the Committee to ensure guidance applied to organizations at any stage of development.

In the final standards report and handbook, there are four categories of standards: Governance, Operations, Services, and Performance. The original section on Operations that was part of the 2014 report was separated into two sections, adding the Governance section to call attention to the importance of strong governance in any organization providing services to those experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

As of June 1, 2015, the State Planning Advisory Committee completed a significant body of work.

- All standards were reviewed and revised as necessary. This resulted in several being deleted as repetitive, some being rearranged in a more logical order, and some language being changed for consistency throughout the standards. The Operations section was separated into two sections, adding Governance.
- Plain language was emphasized. An explanation was written for each standard, including telling more about the meaning of the standard and why it is important.
- One or more measures were identified for each standard.
- Resources were identified for inclusion to assist and guide any organization in meeting each standard. Resources include links to websites with reliable information, sample documents that can serve as a basis for an organization creating their own, and helpful suggestions from the Committee and stakeholders on considerations for a specific standard.
- Standards that would be priorities for a start-up or new organization were identified. Recognizing that a new organization tackling the standards could be overwhelmed, an icon was created to identify those standards that are high priority for start-up and new programs.
- A user handbook was created to provide comprehensive assistance to organizations that want to use the standards. *Iowa Quality Standards: Supporting a Statewide System of Homelessness Services* is a tool designed for use on line, providing active links to other helpful sites, sample documents, and resources.
- The user handbook files, resource documents, links, and other necessary information was transitioned to Iowa Finance Authority and SPPG's designer worked with IFA's staff to get the documents posted for public access on the ICH website.
- In an effort to ensure that standards reflect quality in services, two focus groups were conducted with clients in Iowa City and Des Moines. No clients chose to attend a third scheduled session in Waverly. Findings of these sessions supported and added value to the context of the handbook.
- Six statewide sessions were hosted by local housing councils and the Peer to Peer Symposium between May 27 – June 16, 2015. State Planning Advisory Committee members hosted the sessions and provided information to their peers about this stakeholder-driven set of standards and the User Handbook. Sessions were held in Sioux City, the Peer-to-Peer Symposium in Des Moines, Dubuque, Iowa City, Des Moines (housing council), and Waverly.

The spring outreach was designed to let participants see the standards and begin to talk with peers about how standards might be used in their organizations, as well as how they initially would see their organization meeting the standards. Many participants indicated they currently meet the majority of the standards, which is a good indicator that Iowa has a good start on a system of quality services providers. The standards were well received, appreciation for the level of detail in the User Handbook was evident, and cautions centered on some remaining questions about the voluntary nature of their use and whether they would remain voluntary.

It was notable that, among those participating in the spring 2015 sessions, there was an emerging understanding of the standards as having broad application to organizations and programs regardless of whether they are start-up or mature organizations; funded from public, private, or nonprofit sources; or are structured as private, nonprofit, or faith-based organizations. Messages about broad application of the standards should continue.

The Committee brought its previous year of work to a new level of insight and maturity and has provided a practical self-appraisal tool that was, clearly, positively received by stakeholders across the state.

Recommendations to the ICH

At the close of the 2014 Committee work, a final report was provided that outlined a number of steps that should be taken to increase focus on a statewide system of services, as well as increase the consistency of quality in those services and organizations. Significant work on those steps has been achieved in the past year, but much remains to be done. The Committee provides these recommendations that build from the previous year and add focus on how the standards might be promoted and encouraged as a means to build a statewide system of quality homelessness services.

Recommendations are around four strategies that encompass the activities necessary to move the state forward in supporting quality programs and fostering stronger elements of a statewide system.

- ICH Decisions and Oversight
- Educate and Engage
- Use and Evaluate the Standards
- Develop the Statewide System

ICH DECISIONS AND OVERSIGHT

The Iowa Council on Homelessness has made a significant commitment and investment in the standards development and creating a strong statewide system of services. It is necessary for the ICH to decide and establish how the standards and system will be managed. Questions will soon arise as to who is in charge. Confidence in and integrity of the system is critical to its success. The Committee offers these recommendations to the ICH.

1. **Approve the Iowa Quality Standards and the User Handbook and Appendix as resources for organizations.** While standards were approved last year, they have been revised and the entire set of resource documentation has been developed. The ICH should approve or adopt the standards and supporting documentation, making clear that programs should use the standards in their organizations.
2. **Determine role of the Iowa Council on Homelessness throughout implementation.** As a primary initiative of the Council, it is incumbent upon the organization to consider its role and level of visible activity during implementation and beyond. The Council may choose to be very engaged and participative, or it may delegate the work to a subgroup. The State Planning Advisory Committee recommends that the ICH retain its big picture role of oversight, but that it delegate the bulk of the hands-on work to a subcommittee, such as the State Planning Advisory Committee.
3. **Determine how the standards will be maintained and periodically updated.** Over time and with experience with the standards, there will need to be periodic reviews and decisions on the need to update the standards and/or the handbook. The Advisory Committee recommends that standards be reviewed every three years through a process determined by the ICH or the designated subgroup. The process should include adequate time for structured feedback from users and other stakeholders regarding specific standards and requiring clear justification for any changes.

EDUCATE AND ENGAGE

During this second year of activity, the awareness of the standards initiative is noticeably higher, with many stakeholders having a good basic understanding of the goals. A logical next step is to create opportunities to engage provider organizations statewide as this initiative begins the implementation phase. Those who are involved in some way are much more likely to embrace and advocate with peers the value of implementing standards in each organization. The State Planning Advisory Committee recommends these activities to raise awareness and interest in using the standards and encouraging conscious focus on a statewide system.

1. **Create a positive identity or image for the Iowa Quality Standards.** In some ways, these activities are a marketing campaign. Messages are needed, and an identity must be deliberately identified and established through conscientious and consistent activities. A logo and style would be helpful for recognition of the Iowa Quality Standards.
2. **Develop relevant materials for education and promotion.** Hard copy, electronic, and social media materials can be effective tools for outreach, education, and promotion of this initiative. Using the identity, activities will become known as associated with program quality improvement in keeping with messaging that will be developed. Types of materials will likely include a simple one-page overview of the statewide initiative, highlights of the standards and their benefit to clients, organizations, and the system, and more. A section of the ICH website can be devoted to this effort, and social media might be considered to get the word spread further. The options for education and promotion must consider both the content of and the attitudes and perceptions about the standards.
3. **Ensure materials are available and accessible to all.** Throughout this initiative, transparency has been emphasized, and efforts have been made to reach beyond the already-involved providers to reach stakeholders across the state. During implementation, this becomes even more important. Accessibility of materials and tools will foster involvement of more organizations in using the standards and working to achieve them. All materials, resources, and tools should be made available on the ICH website.

It should be emphasized that the identity development, materials, and promotion activities do not require the services of a costly marketing firm. Rather, working with stakeholders, these can be internally driven and facilitated in ways that yield decisions that resonate with real Iowans across the state.

USE AND EVALUATE THE STANDARDS

The State Planning Advisory Committee believes that encouragement and showing proof that using the standards have value for an organization will motivate other organizations to adopt the standards as well. The Committee recommends the following to promote and prove the value of the standards to an organization.

1. **Conduct a one-year demonstration project with four to six organizations providing different types of services that are geographically diverse, and are of various sizes.** These organizations could be chosen through an application process and could receive technical assistance, training, or other reasonable incentives to participate. The organizations in the demonstration project would periodically report such elements as their progress in meeting

standards, time required, costs, benefits, partnerships and collaborations developed. Board, staff, client, and community perceptions would also be desirable to gather. Findings from the demonstration project would be shared broadly and used in promotional materials as well as to improve the system.

2. **Provide technical assistance as organizations across the state begin to conduct their self-appraisal and work toward implementing standards.** Some organizations are using the draft materials to get started using the standards with their organizations, which is exciting. With any new process, questions and assistance will be requested by homelessness services providers as they delve into addressing the standards as they relate to their organization and programs. Primary assistance should be available on the IFA website through the User Handbook and Appendix. “Live” help will also be sought by some, requiring that designated individuals be able to spend some of their time providing this assistance. It should be noted that State Planning Advisory Committee members have offered to serve as contacts for a level of technical assistance to other organizations.
3. **Maintain resources on the ICH website and ensure they remain current.** Once the IFA website is populated with the Iowa Quality Standards, the User Handbook, and the Appendix, it will require maintenance. Organizations should be encouraged to submit questions, examples of materials or resources to share with others, and other stakeholder-driven opportunities to collaborate and share information statewide. These could be made available through interactive elements of the website.

DEVELOP THE STATEWIDE SYSTEM

The State Planning Advisory Committee knows that a strong statewide system of services will not develop without conscious effort. The Committee recommends that the implementation of the Iowa Quality Standards provides opportunities for greater regional collaboration and networking. To be successful in meeting standards and in strengthening a statewide system, providers will need to work with organizations they have not worked with previously. This affords an opportunity to engage faith-based and non-public-funded organizations for mutual benefit.

1. **The Council should consider hosting hands-on technical assistance workshops.** These could be held periodically throughout the year and across the state. Organizations nearby could send a representative or teams to work on their own organizations’ priorities in a workshop setting with a technical assistance provider.
2. **The Council should encourage or host joint trainings that support organizations in meeting training standards.** Joint training has the additional benefit of participants learning from one another across organizations and to develop relationships that can carry over into program or services collaborations and referrals.
3. **The Council and organizations statewide should move toward a statewide perspective on issues, and address them on a regional basis as defined by natural affinities.** In order to create and sustain a strong system of statewide quality homeless services, it is necessary to keep that goal prominent in decisions on how to communicate, where to hold meetings, and consider the similarities and differences across the state to ensure equity in opportunities to participate and to offer services.

Taking the Next Steps

The State Planning Advisory Committee learned from the May – June 2015 discussions with stakeholders across the state that there is significant interest from organizations in using the standards as a self-appraisal as they are intended. Many were eager to begin immediately, even before the materials were finalized. Some feedback raised questions, and it could be assumed that those who lack interest or doubt the value of the Iowa Quality Standards may have remained silent.

Among key findings from the most recent outreach with stakeholders are the following:

- There is intrinsic value to an organization in applying the Iowa Quality Standards.
- The Iowa Quality Standards seem reasonable and reflect common sense.
- Using the Iowa Quality Standards will support and expand local community collaboration as well as statewide system-building.
- Questions on what type of recognition might be given to an organization that meets the Iowa Quality Standards are common.
- The Iowa Quality Standards have value to both experienced and new-start organizations.
- It is important for organizations to know who will be responsible for and how oversight of the Iowa Quality Standards will be provided.

The State Planning Advisory Committee urges the Iowa Council on Homelessness to act promptly to ensure that the Iowa Quality Standards are available statewide very soon and that ancillary questions are addressed to provide further support and assurance of the commitment to strengthening organizations, services, and the statewide system of services to those experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

The State Planning Advisory Committee further urges the Iowa Council on Homelessness to incorporate its commitment to the Iowa Quality Standards and the entire body of work into the purview of the Policy and Planning Committee of the Council. Specifically, the Iowa Quality Standards would provide an active and continuing focus to this Committee's work and elevate recognition of this effort to the Council Committee level.

The structure will not only raise the Iowa Quality Standards work to Policy and Planning Committee priority, but the Committee structure allows both ICH members and volunteers to serve. The current State Planning Advisory Committee includes ICH members and others who have volunteered significant time over two year – and are interested in continuing to have a role in this important work.

The State Planning Advisory Committee expresses appreciation to the Iowa Council on Homelessness for its confidence and investment in the Iowa Quality Standards. Members eagerly anticipate the next steps to meet the demand created through this initiative.

Iowa Quality Standards: Recommendations for Next Steps is respectfully submitted as a consensus document among the members of the State Planning Advisory Committee, listed here.

- Julie Bockenstedt, Iowa City; Iowa Council on Homelessness
- Michelle Brown, Opening Doors, Dubuque
- Jim Cain, Family Promise of Greater Des Moines, Des Moines

- Crissy Canganelli, Shelter House, Iowa City; Policy & Planning Committee Co-Chair, Iowa Council on Homelessness
- Ronelle Clark, YWCA Domestic Violence Sexual Assault Resource Center and Transitional Housing Program, Clinton
- Carrie Dunnwald, Cedar Valley Friends of the Family, Waverly; Iowa Council on Homelessness
- Heather Harney, HACAP, Hiawatha
- Jeannie Kingery, Northern Lights Shelter for Men & Trinity House of Hope Shelter for Women, Mason City
- Susan McGuire, Center for Siouxland, Sioux City
- Nicole Rethman, Domestic/Sexual Assault Outreach Center, Fort Dodge
- Mark Sertterh, Shelter House, Iowa City
- Tony Timm, Central Iowa Shelter & Services, Des Moines; Policy & Planning Committee Co-Chair, Iowa Council on Homelessness